Digging Deep

by Quidnunc

Summary

When Stanley Yelnats IV is Reaped for the 74th Hunger Games, he isn't overly surprised; after all, luck has never run in his family. With two grandfathers who won the games by chance, Stanley's first priority is to somehow stay alive. But as the games begin and alliances form, Stanley becomes increasingly certain that the Gamemakers are concealing something - something hidden in the arena, that is meant to be forgotten. If he wants to go home, Stanley must dig up the truth.

Notes

Basically, an idea that came to me about a year ago and that I decided to write because it wouldn't let me go. It's a work in progress, and whether I continue is partly based on the feedback I get, so please comment!

If you haven't read 'Holes' I would recommend giving it a read, mainly because it's a dang good book, but the fic can be read without knowledge of it.

Hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: I don't own 'Holes' or 'The Hunger Games,' to my considerable disappointment.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Reaping

Stanley Yelnats was the last in his house to wake, not counting the animals. Norman-the-Scrawny sat across his stomach, facing Stanley and purring. A couple of chickens clucked around on the floor.

Stanley’s bed was in the corner of his room, tucked beneath the rafters. His schoolbooks, clothes, toiletries and other possessions all lived under it. There was enough space, but only just. The house was little more than a shack; his family barely squeezed into it.

He heaved himself out of bed and looked out of the window, though there wasn’t much to see – mostly dense acres of pine and larch trees. The surrounding forest gave District 7 a constant aura of menace. Now, on the morning of Reaping Day, the silence was almost as stifling as the tall, towering trees.

Every year, Stanley and his parents tried to pretend that the Reaping was a kind of game. The winner got to go away to a holiday camp for a while, like the rich kids from the Capitol did. When Stanley was younger he used to play in the backyard, making obstacle courses from the woodpile and pretending that he was at camp. Sometimes he had to climb a high ropes course and make it from one fence to another without touching the ground. Other times, he played at bungee jumping, tying nylon rope to his belt and jumping from the table. Now, Stanley tried to pretend that if he was Reaped he could go off to holiday camp and make friends.

He didn’t have any friends in District 7. He was overweight in a community where starvation was common, and the kids at school resented him for it. Even his parents sometimes made comments without realising it. Just the other day, his mother had cried when she found that there was no meat left for the Sunday stew – she had sworn there had been some leftover. Stanley, knowing he had finished it off, had been too ashamed to confess.

He never meant to overeat. Whenever he did, the food sat heavily in his stomach and made him sick with guilt. But the sickness kept him off school and the eating helped fill the hollow place that the daily teasing left him with. It was a vicious circle that he couldn’t break.

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It was all because of his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather!

Through his nerves and his mouthful of toothpaste, Stanley smiled. It was a family joke. Whenever anything went wrong, it was always blamed on Stanley’s no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather.

Stanley’s great-great-grandfather had been in the 4th Hunger Games, during which he had supposedly stolen a pig from a one-legged District 11 girl, causing her to put a curse on him and all of his descendants. Stanley didn’t know how true this was. His great-great-grandfather had been in the games and won, but the exact circumstances of it were never discussed. He certainly didn’t believe in curses and neither did his parents. But whenever things went wrong, it felt good to be able to blame someone.

Things went wrong a lot. Their luck always seemed to be out.

He spat into the sink and again looked out at the vast expanse of forest. He watched the trees bend in the wind, leaning towards each other as though they were whispering. In his mind he could hear his
grandfather’s voice singing to him.

‘If only, if only,’ the mockingjay sighs
‘The bark on the tree was just a little bit softer.’

*While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely*

*He cries to the moo—oo—oon*

‘If only, if only.’

It was a song his grandfather used to sing to him. The melody was mournful and sweet, but Stanley’s favourite part was always when his grandfather howled the word ‘moon.’

His grandfather had been a cobbler. When he died his father had taken over the business. To run a business well, you needed three things: intelligence, perseverance, and a tiny bit of luck.

Stanley’s father was clever and very determined. Often he would work through the night to get a pair of shoes finished for the morning, simply to earn a little more money. He just never had any luck.

Every time a customer complained, or a nail slipped, or the rent was late, Stanley would hear him cursing his dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-grandfather.

Stanley’s father’s full name was also Stanley Yelnats, his full name being Stanley Yelnats III. Our Stanley is Stanley Yelnats IV. Everyone in his family had always liked the fact that ‘Stanley Yelnats’ was spelt the same forwards and backwards. So they kept naming their sons Stanley. Stanley was an only child, as was every other Stanley Yelnats before him. He sometimes wondered what his parents would have done had they had twins.

All of the Yelnats had something in common. Despite their terrible luck, they never gave up hope. As Stanley’s father liked to say, ‘I learn from failure.’

But Stanley sometimes wondered if that wasn’t part of the curse. If his father wasn’t always so hopeful, it wouldn’t hurt him so much every time those hopes were crushed.

‘Not every Stanley Yelnats has been a failure,’ Stanley’s mother would point out, whenever Stanley or his father became so discouraged that they began to actually believe in the curse. The first Stanley Yelnats, Stanley’s great-grandfather, had been born into luxury, his father having won the Hunger Games. ‘He couldn’t have been too unlucky.’

She always neglected to mention the bad luck that befell the first Stanley Yelnats. He had been Reaped for the 20th Hunger Games and nearly killed by Kissin’ Kate Barlow, that year’s legendarily vicious District 1 tribute. Although he had won in the end, the Capitol hadn’t been pleased; all odds had been on District 1 and dozens of rich sponsors had lost money. A week after his victory, his house in Victor’s Village had mysteriously burned down and never been replaced.

If it weren’t for that, the Yelnats family would now be living in a mansion in Victor’s Village. Instead, they were cramped into a tiny hut that smelled of rotten wood and feet.

*If only, if only …*

From downstairs, Stanley’s mother called for him to come down for breakfast. Drying his face on his pyjama shirt, he took a last look at the forest before obeying.
He hoped that the odds were in his favour.

Stanley felt somewhat dazed as he took his place in the square. He was towards the front, packed in with the other thirteen year olds. Some gave him terse nods, but most ignored him. He generally liked it better that way. One boy, Derrick Dunne, gave him an exaggerated wave and then sniggered. Stanley ignored him.

At school, Derrick Dunne routinely tormented Stanley. The teachers never took Stanley’s complaints seriously, because Derrick was a small, weedy boy who barely reached Stanley’s shoulder. Some even seemed to find it funny that a little kid like Derrick could pick on someone as big as Stanley.

His father said to ignore him. ‘Be the bigger man,’ he told Stanley. The irony was lost to him.

Now Derrick was nudging the boy next to him, trying to find someone to share in the sport. Usually he was successful. Fortunately for Stanley, most of his neighbours were more interested in the stage than him.

As people continued to arrive the space got tighter and Stanley lost sight of Derrick. It gave him some relief, though he couldn’t help feeling self-conscious of the amount of room he was taking up.

He tried to distract himself by focusing on the Reaping platform, at the two glass balls sitting on the table. In the boys’ one, three slips of paper had his name on them. Two were the compulsory submissions, one for each year of his eligibility. The third he had exchanged for tesserae in a splurge of shame, having once again eaten the remnants of the evening meal. He had never told his parents.

Beyond the table holding the glass balls, five people were sitting. One was Mayor Dunne, Derrick Dunne’s father. Like his son, he had pale hair and a ferrety face. Unlike his son, he looked weary and frightened.

Sitting next to him was Angelus Pendanski, District 7’s escort from the Capitol. Pendanski’s taste in suits was a source of rare mirth in the district, and he wasn’t disappointing today. Fluorescent purple with tasselled sleeves, it clashed somewhat scarily with his shock of green hair. Oblivious to the crowd, Pendanski was grinning as he spoke to Mayor Dunne, flashing too many of his teeth. He didn’t seem able to sit still.

As soon as everyone was assembled, Mayor Dunne stepped up to the pundit and began to read the Treaty of Treason. Stanley wriggled uncomfortably, both from the heat and the murmurs of discontent building around him. The entire Reaping was an ordeal, but the reading of the treaty was particularly hated. He got the sense that even Mayor Dunne was relieved when he got to the end and it was time to introduce the past Victors.

To Stanley’s knowledge, District 7 had only had five victors in 74 years. Two of them had been Yelnats and both were now dead. He sometimes wondered why this didn’t cause him more pride.

Of the three living victors, the oldest was Blight Sawyer, who was in his mid-forties. Privately, Stanley had no idea how he’d won. Rake-thin and very pale, he frequently missed Reapings on the grounds of ill health. Stanley found it difficult to imagine him as a killer, or even as a fighter. Then again, his great-grandfather had by all accounts only won through chance.

‘He was lucky to have won,’ his mother liked to point out.

Looking up at Blight’s weathered face, Stanley wasn’t so sure.
The next victor was the most recent, having won only four years back. A community home kid, Clyde Livingston was something of a hero to the younger members of the district, having won his games through an impressive mix of speed, strength and guile. For a couple of years Stanley had saved endlessly for a poster to put on his wall.

After his first Reaping, though, he had changed his mind. Up close Livingston was not the glorified champion he had been presented as on television. Though still handsome, his face now had the haunted look worn by many victors. He was famously shy and rarely seen at public events. And yet he spent the majority of his free time working in the District 7 community home, to which he had donated a large percentage of his winnings.

Instead of buying the poster, Stanley had stuffed the money into an envelope and posted it through Livingston’s letterbox. ‘For the community home,’ he had written on the front. He had no idea whether it had got there.

The last victor, Johanna Mason, was the only female winner. She had won a few years before Clyde Livingston, and he and Blight were the only people she was ever seen to speak civilly to. Abrasive, rude and surly, she had won her games by pretending to be a weakling all through the training process. Unlike the Career districts, District 7 set no great store by winning, but even they had been mortified by her inanity. Stanley had felt sorry for her.

Then she revealed herself to be a born killer, and he realised that he had been fooled.

Unlike Blight and Clyde, who made some effort to dress for the occasion, Johanna Mason never did. She was lounging in her chair, wearing baggy trousers and an oversized sweatshirt that accentuated her boniness. Stanley got the feeling that she didn’t much want to be here. He couldn’t imagine why.

When the introductions were done, Pendanski bounced up to the podium. Stanley felt himself losing concentration as he went through the usual speech. Suddenly he couldn’t stop thinking of those three slips in the big glass dome. He wished he could see his parents in the crowd.

And then it was time for the drawing. Pendanski made a show of reaching into the bowl holding the girls’ names. Almost unconsciously, Stanley held his breath.

‘Maeve Collingwood!’

There was a brief silence. Then there was a movement in the fifteens and the crowd parted for a tall, gangly girl to make her way forwards. Stanley glimpsed her face as she mounted the stage. She was wide-eyed and stunned.

‘Boys next!’ Pendanski trilled, reaching into the other bowl. Stanley tensed. He could feel the beat of his heart in his fingertips.

Pendanski picked a slip deep in the bowl and drew it out. He paused dramatically before reading out the name.

‘Derrick Dunne!’

Stanley relaxed, a mixture of relief and pity coursing through him. He disliked Derrick, but he didn’t want him to die. He moved back, along with the others in his area, to allow him through.

But something was wrong.

Onstage the Mayor had gone a sick, greenish colour at the calling of the name. He was now on his feet, talking urgently to Pendanski, drawing him away so they had their backs to the crowd. Stanley
wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw something flutter as it exchanged hands.

Then Pendanski was back at the podium and announcing that, due to unforeseen circumstances, the male tribute was to be reselected.

Stanley turned sharply and caught Derrick’s eye. He knew he should be furious, but his face was so ashen, so confused, that he could only dredge up pity for him. Then his attention was called back to the stage, where Pendanski was once again rooting through the slips.

Once again, he withdrew one with a flourish. Once again, he paused before reading it.

And, once again, the District 7 tribute was a Stanley Yelnats.

Stanley cursed his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather.

The odds were just never in his favour.
In which Stanley travels to the Capitol, is intimidated by his mentor, and wonders what exactly his token is.

The first thing Stanley thought was that this couldn’t be happening. Yes, he was unlucky, but this unlucky? He must have heard wrong.

But no-one else was stepping forwards and everyone was looking at him, and next thing his feet were moving without his consent, carrying him past the rows of silent bystanders and towards the stage.

He kept his eyes focused on his feet. One in front of the other. One step at a time. He figured that way his face wouldn’t show how scared he was. When he reached the platform though, he had to look up to find his way. That was when he caught sight of the victors’ faces.

Their expressions differed. Blight looked confused and sad. Clyde’s face was stony. When he looked at Johanna, though, he started: she was livid with rage. He caught her eye and she held his gaze for a second, before turning towards Pendanski and making as though she would stand up. But Clyde Livingston pulled her down quickly. He nodded to Stanley.

‘On you go.’

Stanley was grateful. He didn’t want any trouble.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. He stood on the stage, looking out over a sea of faces. He couldn’t make out any of their expressions but focused on keeping his own neutral. He didn’t want to upset his parents.

When Pendanski told him to shake hands with the girl tribute he met her eyes and she gave him a very small, not-quite-real smile. Her lips were nearly white and her freckles stood out alarmingly. He tried to smile back.

Then they were being ushered off the stage towards the Justice Building and the crowd were clapping mutedly and none of it seemed real.

But it was.

Once inside, Stanley was led to a small room and left there. He sat down and tried to breathe. He knew he should be calm when his parents arrived; appearing frightened would only further upset them. He made himself look around the room, taking it in to distract himself from his thoughts. Plush blue carpet. Overstuffed chairs with velvet cushions. It was without doubt the most luxurious place he’d ever set foot in.

After an interval the door was opened and his parents allowed in. His father had been crying. His mother just hugged him. He could tell she was trying to keep back the tears.
‘Do your best,’ she told him, when she finally let him go. ‘That’s all we can ask of you.’

‘I will,’ he told them, honestly. There was a burning feeling in his chest that had never been there before. Having them there with him, saying goodbye for perhaps the last time, was bringing home how much he needed them. How much they needed him. He knew he had to fight.

‘We’re proud of you no matter what,’ his father was saying. ‘We know you’ll do the right thing, Stanley.’

And his father was hugging him, which he had rarely done before, and it was all becoming real.

Then the peacekeepers were at the door saying that the three minutes were nearly up, and his father was pressing something into his hand.

‘Your great-grandfather came out of the arena with this. He lost his district token, but wouldn’t let go of this when they found him. I want you to take it with you. Maybe it’ll bring you luck.’

He pocketed the token without looking at it and hugged both of them goodbye. He wanted to say he loved them but somehow, although surely there was never a better moment than now, the words wouldn’t come out.

‘We’ll be all right,’ said his mother, as they were led away. ‘Don’t worry about us, Stanley. Just look after yourself.’

He hoped that meant that they knew.

After a couple of minutes another visitor was shown in. This one was unexpected.

‘Sit down, boy,’ Blight chided as he entered. ‘Dispense with the formalities, we haven’t much time.’

Bewildered, Stanley sat. Blight took the seat next to him, leaning forward with an air of urgency.

‘Right. I may not be mentoring this year, but that doesn’t mean I can’t stick my oar in. Any questions, ask them now.’ He glared expectantly at Stanley, who gulped. He supposed he did have questions, but now? He barely felt lucid. Quite honestly, he wanted to be left alone. But Blight continued to stare at him and in the end he asked the only question that came to mind.

‘What do I do?’

‘You fight! That’s what you do, Stanley. You fight as hard as you can; you remember what you’re fighting for; and you don’t let that grump Mason put you off. That’s what you do, my lad.’

Despite himself, Stanley smiled a little. If only it were that simple. Still, it was nice to have someone offer him advice.

‘Thanks, Mr Sawyer.’

‘Blight. The name’s Blight.’ He stretched out his hand and, when Stanley took it, covered it with both of his. ‘Good luck, Stanley Yelnats. Your grandfathers fought and so can you. Good luck to you.’

And then he was gone.
There were no more visitors after that. Stanley sank into a chair and spent the remaining time watching the trees through the window. They calmed him. He hoped there were trees in the arena.

After a while, he remembered the token and felt in his pocket for it. It felt cylindrical, metallic and smooth. A bullet? He eased it out and examined it. It was a gold tube, about as long and thin as his middle finger. The tube was open at one end and closed at the other. He didn’t think it was a bullet.

Stanley moistened his finger with spit and rubbed it over the surface. Rid of some of its dust, there seemed to be some sort of engraving on the flat, closed end. He spat on it again and polished the engraving on his trousers.

He looked again at the design on the bottom of the tube. It looked like the outline of a heart, with the letters K B etched inside it.

What was K B? He had no idea. His brain felt fuzzy and he just wanted to sleep. Sighing, he put the tube back into his pocket. What good would it do him now, anyway?

As soon as they got on the train, Stanley and Maeve were led to their rooms. Maeve had gained some colour since the Reaping, but not much. Her face was streaked with tears but she held her head high, making no effort to hide them. When they reached her room she disappeared into it without a word.

Stanley’s room was even fancier than the one in the Justice Building. The bed had silken sheets and he had a private bathroom and dressing room. When he opened the drawers of his bureau they were filled with new clothes.

Pendanski laughed at the astonishment on his face. ‘Everything in here’s at your disposal, so feel free to use it. I’ll fetch you for supper in an hour.’ Then he skipped out.

After Pendanski left, Stanley just stood for a while, trying to take it in. The rich materials and colours were making this seem all the more surreal. He decided to take a shower. He hoped it would clear his mind.

Despite everything, the shower made him feel a little better. At home the water was always either freezing cold or scalding hot. In winter the pipes often froze and they had to melt snow for baths. He let the water wash over him for a long time, trying to clean off all the fear and confusion of the afternoon. From now on he would have to be strong.

He dressed in cord trousers and a blue shirt, remembering at the last minute to place the gold tube in his pocket. He had no idea what it was but it made him feel safer. The last person to hold it had been his father.

When Pendanski came to collect him, he had discarded the garish suit and was dressed more simply, in beige trousers and a white shirt. As Stanley followed him down the corridor, he noticed that he literally walked with a spring in his step. He was like a particularly exuberant spaniel.

The others sat waiting for them in the wood-panelled dining room. In a different situation, the range of facial expressions would have made Stanley laugh. Johanna Mason, wearing her usual scowl, was wielding a knife and scraping a design into the table-top. Clyde Livingston was fixing her with a disapproving glare, which she was completely ignoring. Maeve, sandwiched between them, looked terrified.

‘Here we are!’ exclaimed Pendanski, pulling out a chair for Stanley. ‘All refreshed?’
‘Oh, as a daisy.’ Johanna smiled at him in a way that distinctly reminded Stanley of a shark. Pendanski, apparently impervious, beamed back.

‘Excellent. And how are our tributes?’

Stanley managed a weak grin. He hoped it appeared genuine. Judging by Johanna’s snort, though, it didn’t. Clyde spoke for the first time, sounding tired.

‘You know how it is, Angelus. They’re overwhelmed with excitement on the first night.’

‘Of course, of course – ‘

Pendanski kept chattering as the meal was served, and the attention was drawn away from Stanley. Thankful for the peace, he chanced a glance at Johanna, only to find her looking right at him. He couldn’t quite read her expression, but thought it might have been pity. Then she winked at him and he felt himself blush.

He focused on the food after that.

The starter was a bright red soup, served with a swirl of cream and warm, crusty bread. It was the best thing Stanley had ever tasted. Across from him, Maeve just crumbled the bread and took bird-like sips of her soup. Her hand shook when she lifted the spoon. In this light her face was pinched and bony, almost unhealthy looking. It was still tearstained.

Seeing Maeve’s obvious despair gave Stanley a strange feeling in his chest. He realised with some unease that he felt deeply sorry for her. Then he shrugged. She might be his enemy, but it was a whole week until he needed to face that. And it was better than feeling sorry for himself.

After the soup came a green salad with olives and crumbled goat’s cheese. The main course was a flaky white fish that Pendanski called turbot, served with a creamy sauce. Stanley had never tasted anything like it before. Maeve still only picked at hers.

As they ate, Clyde began to ask them questions about their lives. They were casual at first, just about their families, school, where they lived. This seemed to calm Maeve, who rather hesitantly took up the conversation. She lived with her parents. Her father was a lumberjack and her mother a seamstress. No, she had no siblings. No, she had no pets. Yes, she enjoyed school. Yes, she got good marks. Her favourite subject was Maths. Why?

‘Because it never changes,’ she answered simply. Stanley saw a look pass between Clyde and Johanna. But it was only fleeting and he couldn’t read it. Then Clyde was addressing him.

‘What about you, Stanley?’

Stanley floundered. ‘I’m just average.’ Whilst it was true, he wasn’t sure what else to say. How he hated school? How he had no friends? How he was off a lot of the time anyway, with various sicknesses or having to help his father? He decided it didn’t matter.

‘I’m just average,’ he repeated, looking Clyde in the eye. ‘I live with my parents. My dad’s a cobbler and my mother’s a healer. I haven’t got any brothers or sisters, but I’ve got a cat called Norman. And we keep hens for the eggs. And my great-great grandfather, and great-grandfather both won their games, but only by chance. That’s all, really.’

Clyde nodded, his face inscrutable. ‘Okay.’

They talked for a bit longer, with Clyde asking most of the questions and Pendanski occasionally
contributing. Johanna had resumed scratching at the table. Like Maeve, she ate and drank very little, but sat languidly, looking bored and occasionally contemptuous at their answers. At the end of the meal, when the servers were clearing away, she finally spoke.

‘What do you think you’ll gain by winning?’

Stanley looked uncertainly at Maeve, who gulped audibly before whispering, ‘I just want to stay alive.’ Her eyes filled with tears and Clyde put a hand on her shoulder. Johanna, though, was not impressed.

‘Not enough! There has to be something you’re fighting for, or I may as well christen you Dead and Deader and tell you to enjoy the food while you can. Believe me, I’d lose no sleep over it.’

Looking at the circles under her eyes, Stanley believed her. He remembered seeing those circles before, in old family photographs. His Victor grandfathers had both worn that haunted look.

He wondered again whether winning really was the better end of the deal. But they were all looking at him for his answer, and he’d promised his parents he’d fight. Besides, questioning the desirability of winning probably wasn’t the most sensible thing to do at this stage.

He raised and lowered one shoulder. ‘Same as Maeve. I’m all my parents have, and Norman isn’t great company.’

This elicited a chuckle from Clyde, but didn’t seem to appease Johanna, who slowly nodded, her eyes narrow. But Pendanski chose that moment to pipe up, suggesting that they go and watch the recap of the reapings. Stanley felt slightly ill at the thought, but was quite glad to break up the somewhat awkward meal.

The recap was much like the ones that he was used to watching every year. The only difference, he realised queasily, was that this time he was sizing up the competition with a view of fighting them.

Only a few stood out. All of the tributes from 1, 2 and 4 volunteered, as was normal. 2’s tributes were particularly brutal looking: a dark haired girl with a mean grin and a gangly beanpole of a boy, whose hair stuck up wildly around his head.

The incident in 7 was doctored out entirely, so that it looked like his name was called from the start. Stanley stole a glance at his mentors. Johanna looked bitter, Clyde resigned. He wondered how much help they’d be in terms of survival.

The boy from 9 was a giant, broad as well as tall. The girl from 10 was just twelve and needed a crutch to get to the stage. Both of 11’s tributes were very small.

And then, just as Stanley was becoming drowsy, something different happened. In District 12 a fourteen-year-old was chosen, but before she could reach the stage another girl burst out, shouting that she volunteered. Both were small, skinny and near identical looking, and the commentary later confirmed that they were twins.

As the volunteer mounted the stage and shakily announced her name, a boy ran out from the eighteen-year-olds and carried the remaining twin away. From their physical similarity, Stanley guessed him to be their brother.

Over the footage, the commentator announced the girl’s name again, her voice having been lost to her sister’s screaming.

Tessa Hawthorne.
When the programme had ended, the adults bid them goodnight and told them to get some sleep. Stanley didn’t need telling twice. After the events of the past few hours, he barely had the energy to brush his teeth.

As he drifted off, cocooned in the warm blankets, the last thing he thought of was Tessa Hawthorne, the girl from District 12 who volunteered to save her sister. He wished he could be that brave.

There would be no saving anyone in the arena.
The Mentors

Chapter Summary

In which our Tributes are discussed, Pendanski is unnerved and Johanna can't hold her alcohol.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once Stanley and Maeve had left, Johanna abandoned all attempt at sobriety and poured herself a tall tumbler of whiskey. Clyde also accepted a glass.

‘What do you think?’ he asked, after taking a measured drink.

Johanna drained her glass, and wrinkled her nose. ‘That I need something stronger.’ She rose to refill it. Pendanski looked slightly aghast.

‘Jo, you should probably stay sober –’

‘What, so I can witness their deaths in full possession of my senses? Great idea, Mom,’ Johanna snarled. ‘And I’m not ‘Jo’, not to you anyway.’ She took another deep swig, straight from the bottle.

‘Mom?’ Pendanski, sounding utterly bemused, looked askance at Clyde, who stood up and tried to prise the whiskey from Johanna’s grasp.

‘A reference to your maternal concern, I think, Angelus. Ignore her. He’s right, Johanna; you can’t help those kids from the floor.’

‘I can’t help them, full stop,’ Johanna muttered. But she did let go of the bottle, to Pendanski’s obvious relief.

As he sat down again, Clyde repeated the question.

‘So, what do you think?’

Johanna rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly? That the girl’s already given up and the boy’s in no shape for an arm wrestle, let alone a fight to the death. In short, we’ve got one kid who can’t win and another who won’t. Another successful year, my friend!’ She raised her glass in a mock toast.

Clyde pursed his lips, thinking. ‘The boy’s average, as he says, but he’s got some character. The girl’s got brains but, as you say, she’s already beaten down. Neither of them are fighters.’

‘But are they survivors?’

‘Hard to tell. You’ve got one kid who’s overweight in a famine region and a teenage girl who actually enjoys school. Chances are they won’t have had it easy.’

Pendanski cut in, sounding unconvinced. ‘There’s a big difference between being targeted at school and the arena.’
Clyde answered with uncharacteristic heat. ‘Have you been in a school recently? ‘Cos I have, not so long ago, and let me tell you that children are ruthless in picking on anything that’s different. By the time I was reaped I’d been in enough fights to last me a lifetime, and while it wasn’t fun, it made me stronger.’

Johanna nodded her assent. ‘Where do you think I learned to wield an axe? Oh, how I miss P.E. lessons.’ She gave a wicked smile, as though reminiscing, and leant back in her chair. Pendanski, missing the wink she gave Clyde, blanched.

Clyde, who hadn’t missed it, suppressed a smirk. ‘I dread to think of your school reports, Johanna.’

‘Oh, so do I. Of course, thinking of them is all I do; they always ended up on the wrong end of an axe, somehow.’ She grinned, then became serious. ‘But yeah, if they’re used to having it difficult, that might be to their advantage.’

‘So we’ll focus on both of them?’

‘For now, yes. I don’t hold out much hope, but they’re better than some years. The boy’s at least interesting, what he said about his grandfathers.’

Clyde frowned. ‘They must be a lucky family.’

‘Luck doesn’t come into it, Livingston. It’s something Victors have that pushes them to win and to live with their actions.’ Johanna’s eyes darkened and she shuddered, looking abruptly younger. ‘Call it survivor’s instinct, call it lack of conscience; I don’t know what it is. But let’s just hope Stanley’s got it.’

Stanley was woken by Pendanski knocking on his door. ‘Time to get up, Stanley! The early bird catches the worm!’ For a minute, he wondered whether Pendanski had any concept of life outside candy-land.

He pulled on yesterday’s clothes and checked that the tube was still in his pocket. His fingers traced the odd design on its bottom, and he thought of his parents, waking up back in District 7. He imagined his mother preparing breakfast, collecting eggs from the chicken run before starting work for the day. The thought sent a pang into his stomach. He hoped they were coping all right.

As he entered the dining carriage, he noticed that Pendanski looked slightly distressed. The reason became clear when he followed his gaze to Johanna Mason, tired and tousled looking and wolfing down bacon with an almost obscene enthusiasm.

When she spied Stanley she kicked out a chair and said, thickly, ‘Sit down. Food’s prime.’ Stanley obeyed and was immediately served with a huge platter of food: scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, sausage and mushrooms. Needing no further encouragement, he started in on his hash browns.

When he had eaten his fill, he sat back and tried to decide which drink to try first. There was a pot of tea, a similar looking hot drink that smelled sharp and pungent, a cold orange glass of something and a rich mug of something that he didn’t recognise at all.

‘It’s called hot chocolate,’ Maeve offered, tentatively. ‘It’s really nice.’ Looking at her, Stanley noticed that she had a brown moustache from drinking it. Also, she was smiling. She looked better this morning, calmer and more collected – though he couldn’t help noticing that she still hadn’t touched her food.
‘Thanks,’ he smiled, taking a sip of hot chocolate. ‘It was delicious. ‘The, um, food’s lovely. You should try some.’

‘Perhaps some fruit,’ volunteered Clyde, in a way that made Stanley think he had been fighting this battle for a while. ‘The strawberries are to die for.’

Still smiling, but tightly, Maeve just shook her head.

‘Well, if you’re not eating it –’ Johanna reached across for Maeve’s plate, only to be slapped away by Clyde. ‘Ow!’

‘Serves you right. Show some sensitivity!’

Scowling, Johanna seized an apple from the tureen and took a huge bite, chewing messily. Pendanski winced. Clyde pointedly ignored her.

‘We’ll be arriving in the Capitol in less than an hour. The opening ceremony is tonight, so you’ll be taken straight to the Remake Centre to get ready. If I give you one piece of advice, it would be to cooperate with your stylists. How you look can increase or destroy your chances, and you want to be aiming for the former. Though it may not be evident from Captain Lightweight here,’ he nudge Johanna, ‘the prettier you are, the more sponsors you’ll get.’

Through her mouthful, Johanna mumbled something that sounded a lot like, ‘And don’t let them make you trees.’ It took Stanley a second to work out what she said. When he did, his stomach sank. *Seriously?*

Clyde looked embarrassed. ‘Erm, yes. You probably will be dressed as trees.’

Johanna gave a huge swallow and added, ‘‘S’ not the end of the world. If it’s really bad, just strip – the Capitol likes a bit of skin!’ She leered at Pendanski, who flushed to his ears and then stared steadfastly at his knees. Clyde put his head in his hands. He seemed to be muttering ‘Why?’

Catching Maeve’s eye, Stanley saw mirrored on her face the same emotions that he was feeling: conflicting urges to laugh and cry. He tried to picture himself as a tree, and gave into the first with little difficulty. After a moment he heard Maeve join in.

It helped. After all, it was better to be laughed with than laughed at.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, we reach the Capitol in the next chapter - if you've stuck with it so far, thank you so much. More to come, so keep reading!

End Notes

This is a multi-chapter fic, so more chapters are coming. Comments are appreciated :-}
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!